

100th Anniversary of Route 66 in Livingston County, Illinois



1926-1977



By: Dale C. Maley

Last Updated: 02-19-2026

Route 66

Historical Personal Transportation Modes



Route 66

Model T => Autos

Passenger Trains

1st Surveys (Roads)

Horses

Native
American

White
Settlers

1830

1850

1870

1890

1910

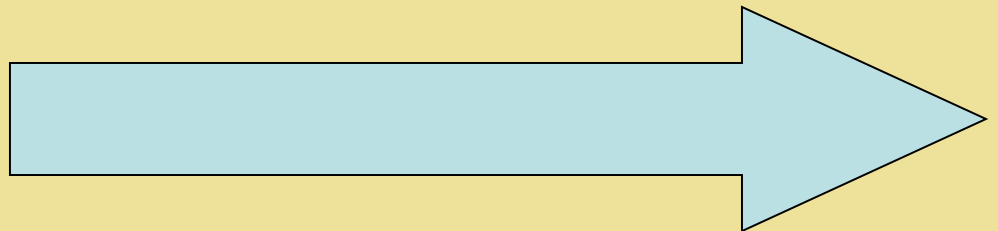
1930

Route 66

- One of most famous Native American Chiefs in Illinois was Chief Pontiac
- City of Pontiac, Illinois, named after Chief Pontiac



- Starved Rock legend



Route 66

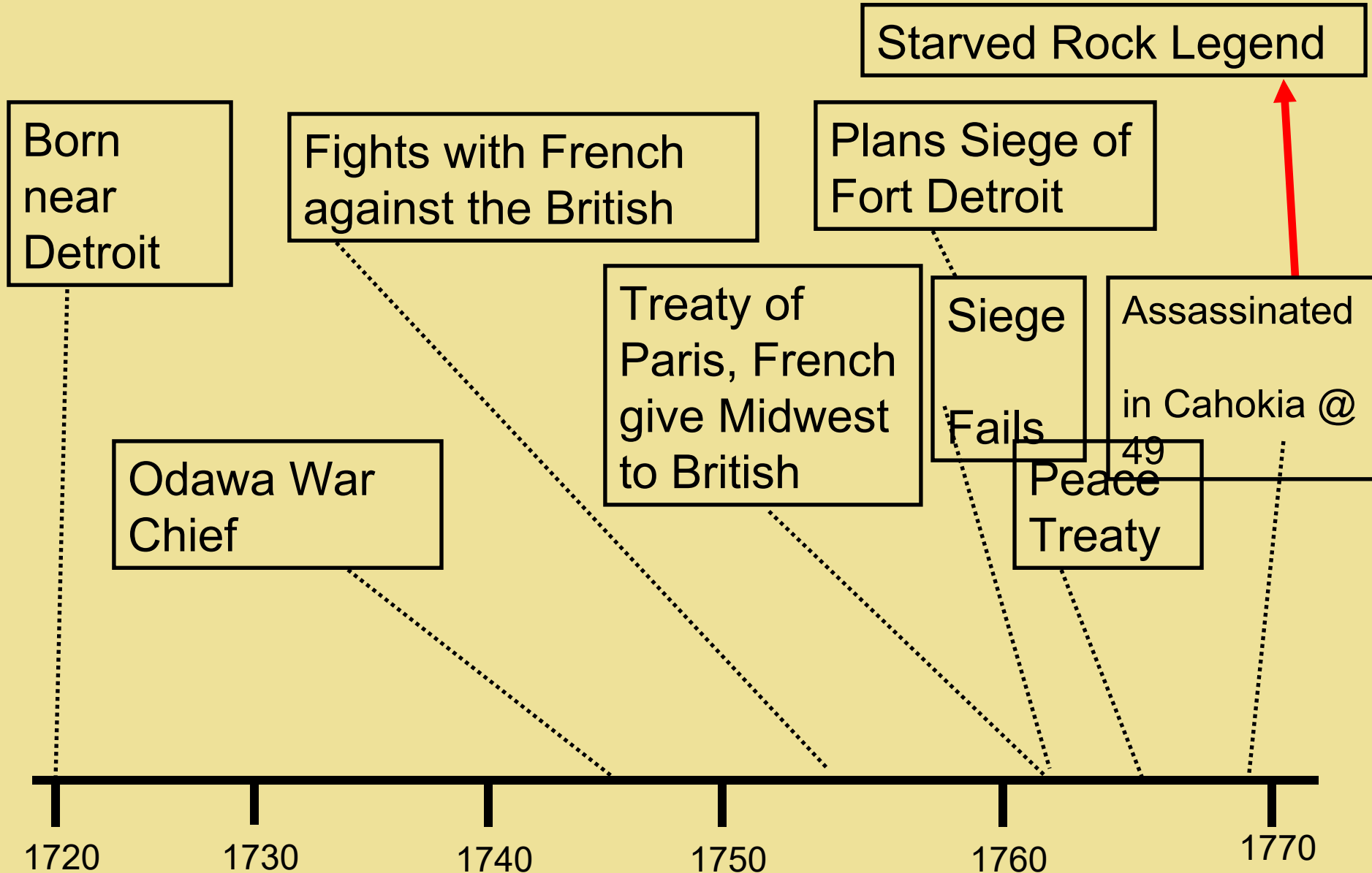
- According to legend, in 1769, the Starved Rock Massacre took place near LaSalle, Illinois.

- The legend claims that after a member of the Illiniwek Confederation killed **Chief Pontiac**, several tribes, including the Chippewa, Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Kickapoo, united to seek vengeance against the Illiniwek.

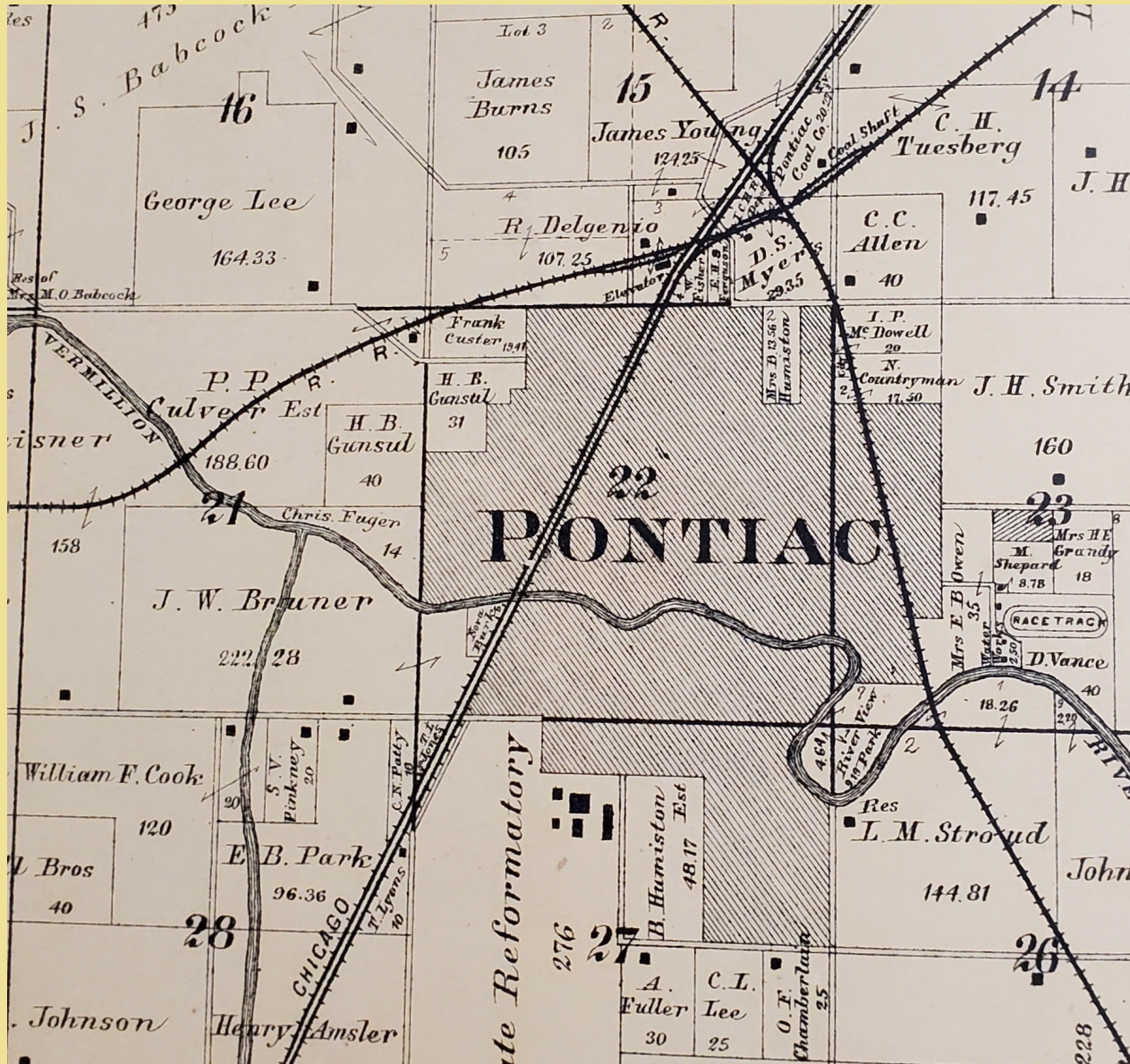
- These Native American tribes starved the Illiniwek tribe to death.



Chief Pontiac - Timeline



Route 66



- 1893 Atlas
- 3 Railroads
 - Chicago & Alton
 - Wabash
 - Illinois Central
- No 2-lane highways
- No Interstates
- Horse & Railroad Era

Route 66

•1830-1900 Roads

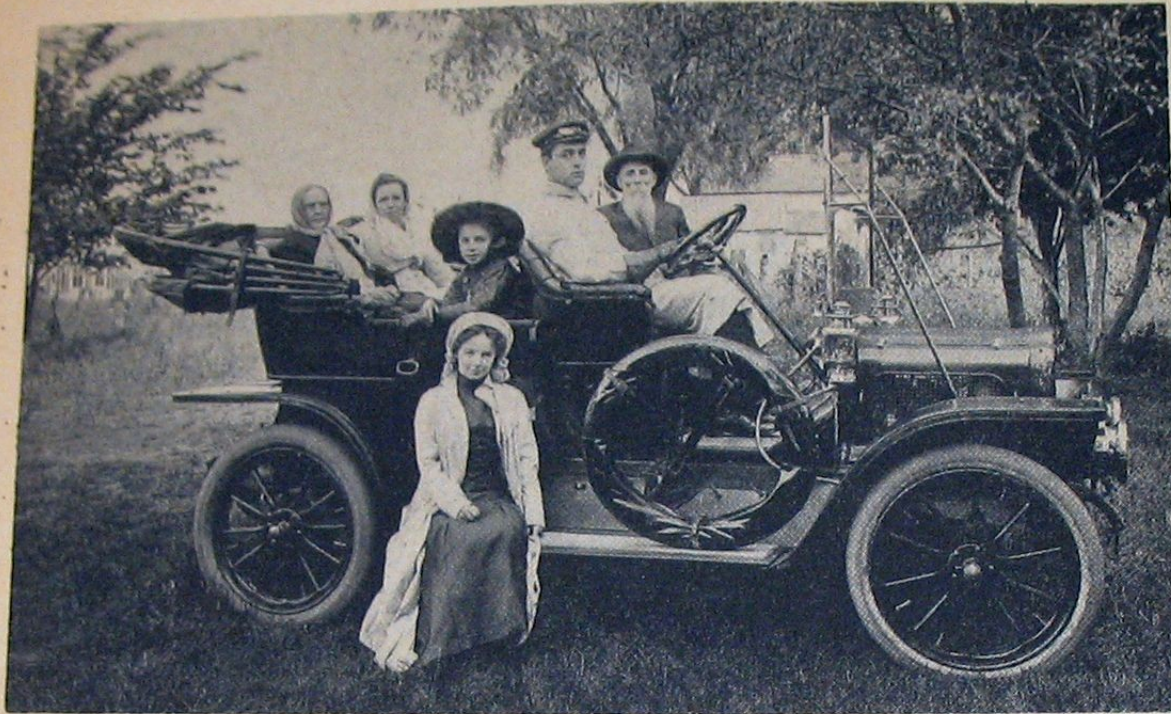
- Some dirt roads for horses, wagons, buggies
- Road connecting Pontiac and Middleport (now Watseka)
 - connected 2 county seats
- Fairbury to McDowell to Pontiac along the Vermilion
- Likely some dirt roads from Pontiac to Odell, Dwight
- Not enough people to justify stagecoach routes
 - only larger cities had stagecoaches

Route 66

•1st Automobiles

- Started to appear in the 1901 to 1903 era
- Very expensive
- First bought by medical doctors and wealthy businessman
- Often had to have a full-time mechanic to service each automobile
- Consumers had choices of:
 - Electric (Batteries)
 - Steam
 - Internal Combustion (Gasoline)

Route 66



AUTHOR ALMA LEWIS-JAMES was about seven or eight years old when her family was snapped by a local photographer in their new White Steamer (above).

Sitting in the touring car are, from the left, her grandmother, Mrs. T. A. Beach; her mother, Mrs. G. C. Lewis, wife of a local physician, the author; Nelson Cottingham, young local man who drove the White Steamer; and her grandfather, T. A. Beach, who founded the local bank. Perched on the running board is her sister, Mamie, who later became Mrs. Walter Ficklin, mother of Robert Ficklin.

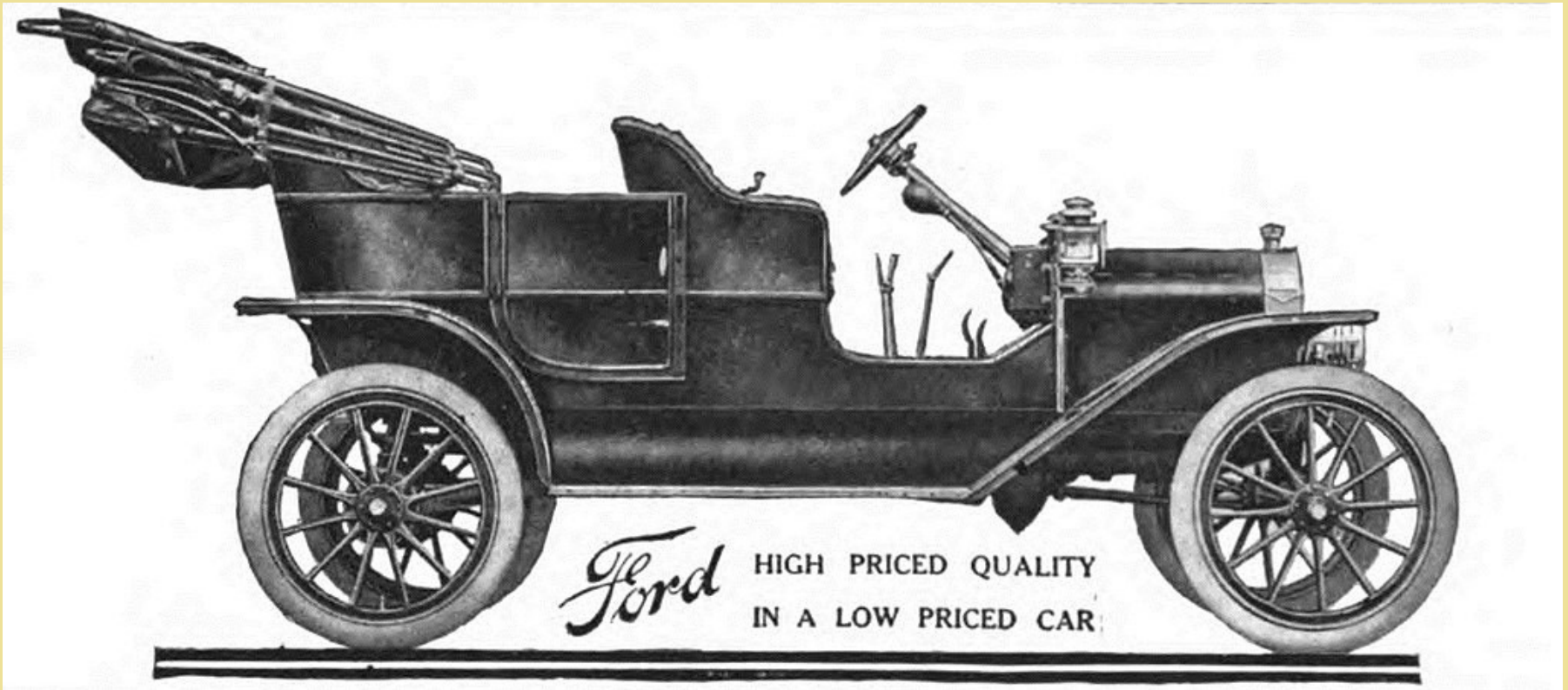
Mrs. James, now a trifle camera-shy, recalls that she deliberately positioned her hands gracefully for this photo, as she had just received her first pair of kid gloves and wanted them shown to best advantage.

Young Cottingham was sent to the factory to learn how to operate her grandfather's car, as it was a quite complex mechanism. She says that he needed at least a half hour notice before the car was to be used, for it took that long to get up the steam.

The house in the background stood where the Neale Hanley home is now located on Hickory street.

- Fairbury
- Steam powered
- Owned by very wealthy banker
- Had to warm up 30 minutes to get steam pressure up!

Route 66



- Model T introduced in 1908 for \$825
- Price reduced to \$410 = to \$14,032 in today's dollars
- Every family could afford to trade in their horse for a car !!

Route 66

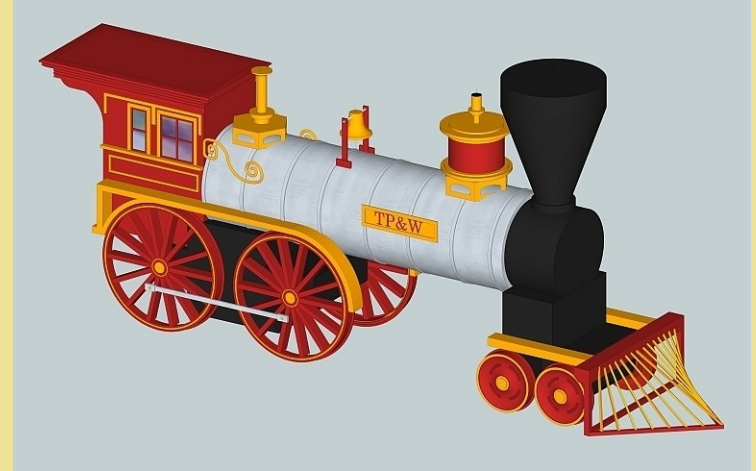
Big Problem

- No good roads for automobiles
- Mostly dirt roads which turned to mud
- From ~1910 onwards, Americans started to demand better roads for their automobiles

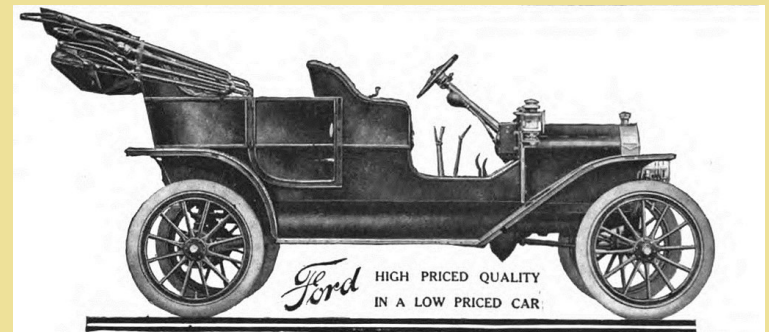


Route 66

- Automobile brought new freedom to Americans
 - Were tied to the railroads
 - Railroads only ran at certain times
 - May not be railroad where you wanted to go

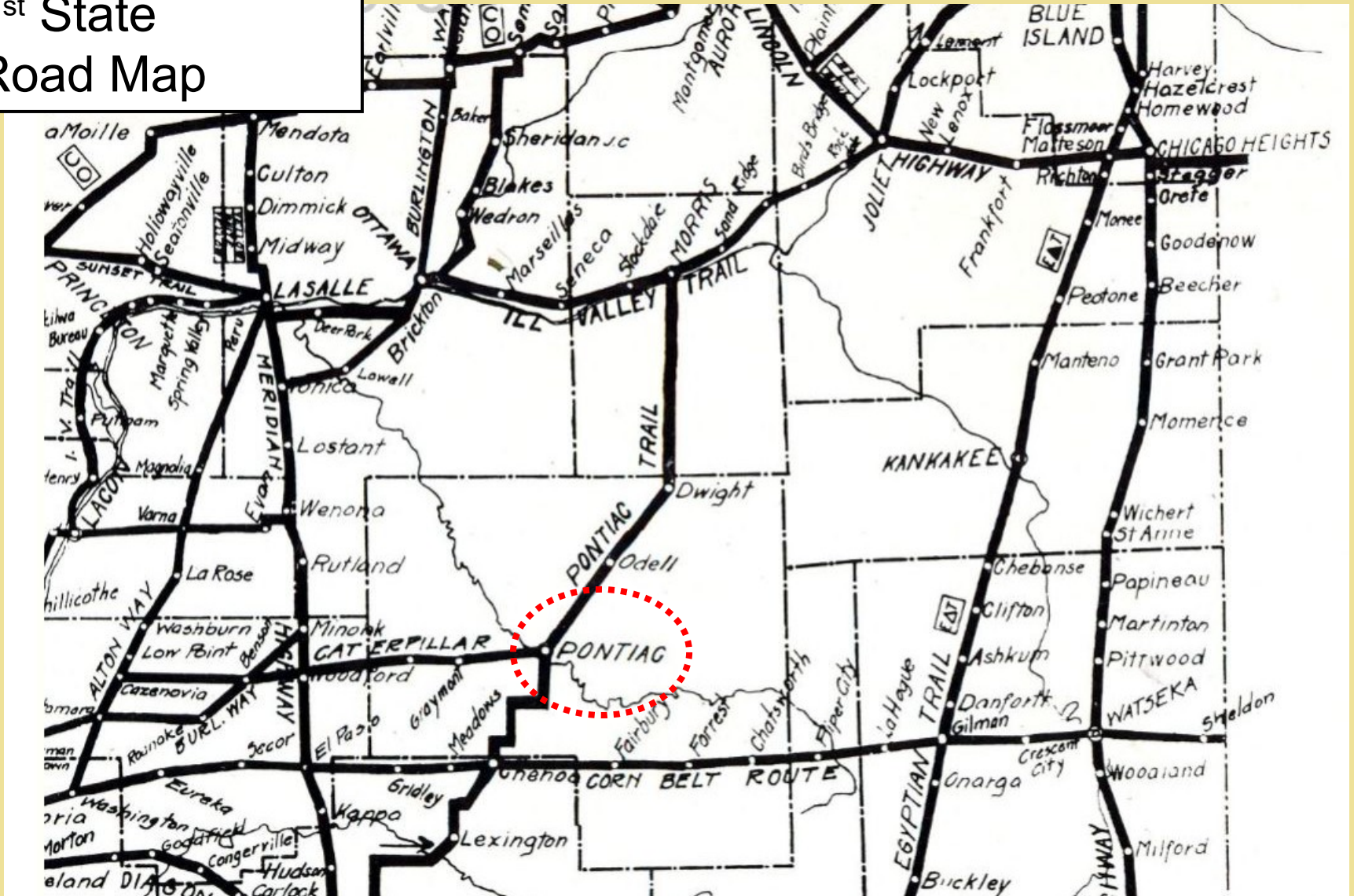


- Americans love affair with automobiles started in 1908 and still going strong after 118 years !!!!!!!!!!!



1917 1st State Road Map

Route 66



Pontiac Trail – named after Chief Pontiac

Route 66

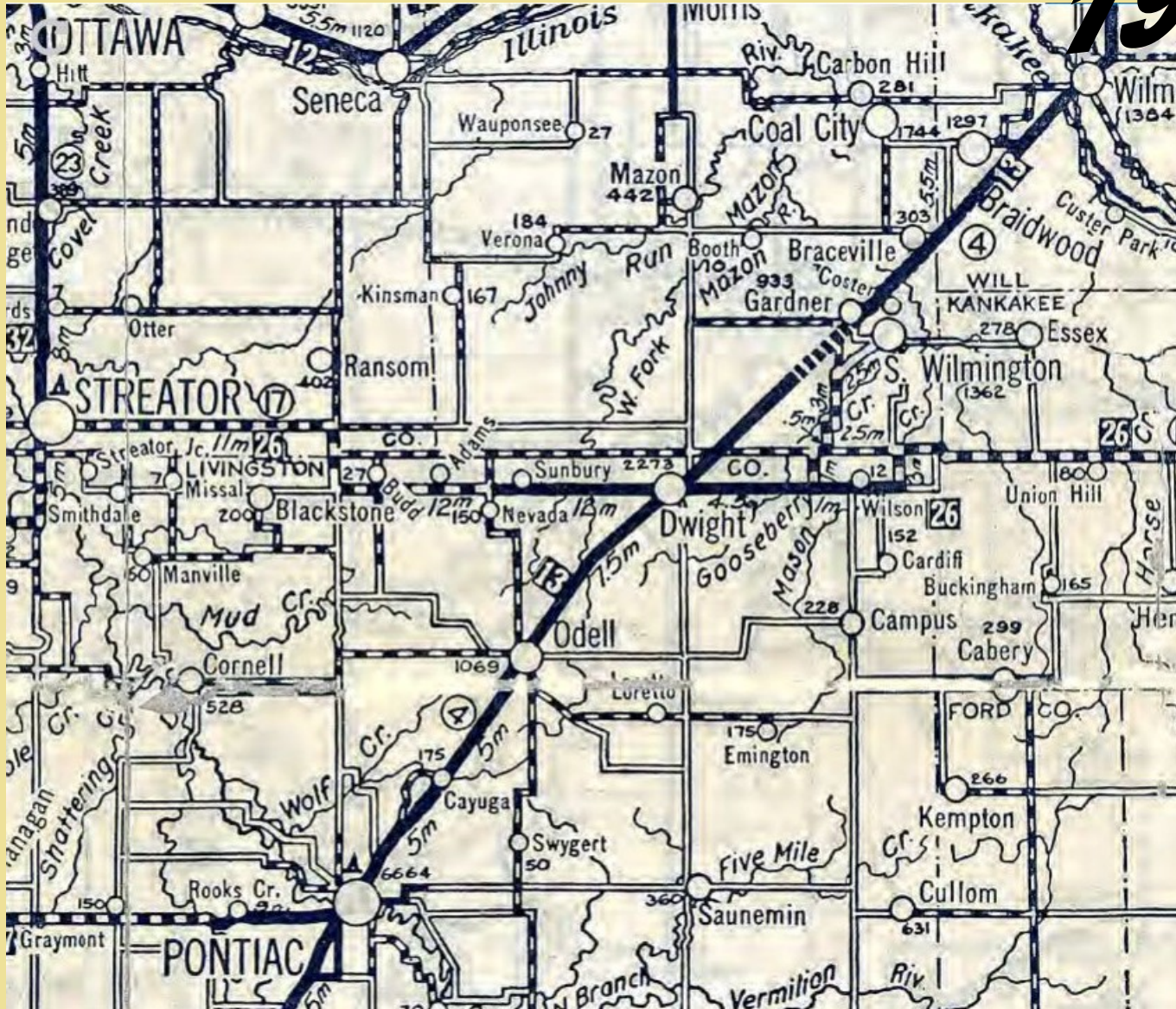
1922



Still Pontiac Trail going up to Morris, Fairbury = Corn Belt

Route 66

1924



Switched from Pontiac to Morris to Wilmington, Route 4

Route 66

1925



Fairbury now Route 8

Route 66

1926



- Route 66 started that year, but State of Illinois likely behind with State Road Maps
- Still Route 4
- Fairbury/Chatsworth still Route 8

Route 66

1927



- Pontiac still Route 4
- Fairbury still Route 8

Route 66

1928

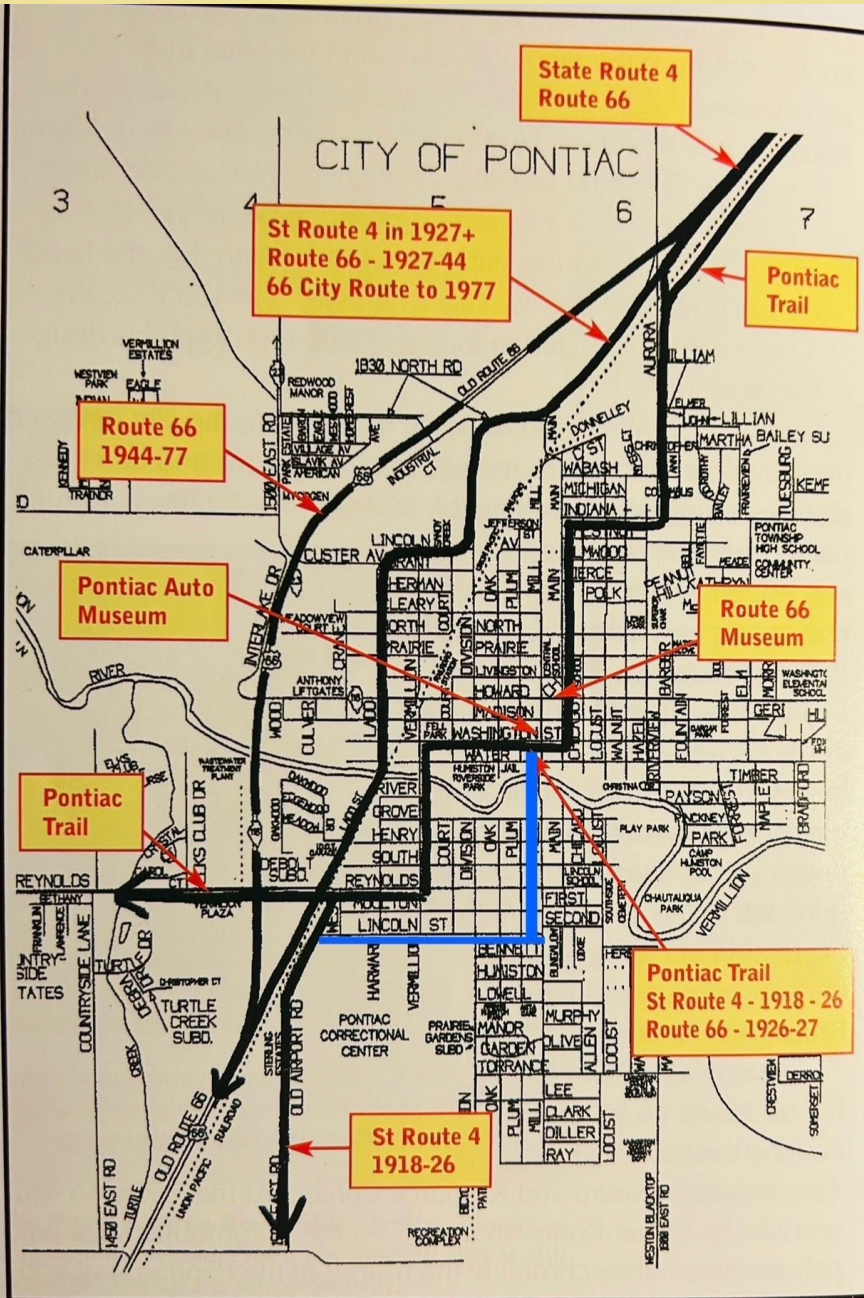


- Pontiac now both Route 4 and 66
- Fairbury/Chatsworth now both Route 8 and 24

Route 66

- What were the major changes to Route 66 in Pontiac from inception in 1926 through de-commissioning in 1977?

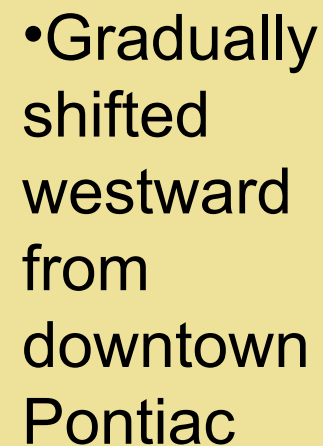
1. The original downtown route (1926)
2. A straighter Chicago Street routing (1930)
3. A wartime-era bypass with four-lane improvements (1940s–1950s)
4. Functional replacement by I-55 that led to the Route 66 designation ending in Illinois on January 1, 1977.



Routes in the City of Pontiac

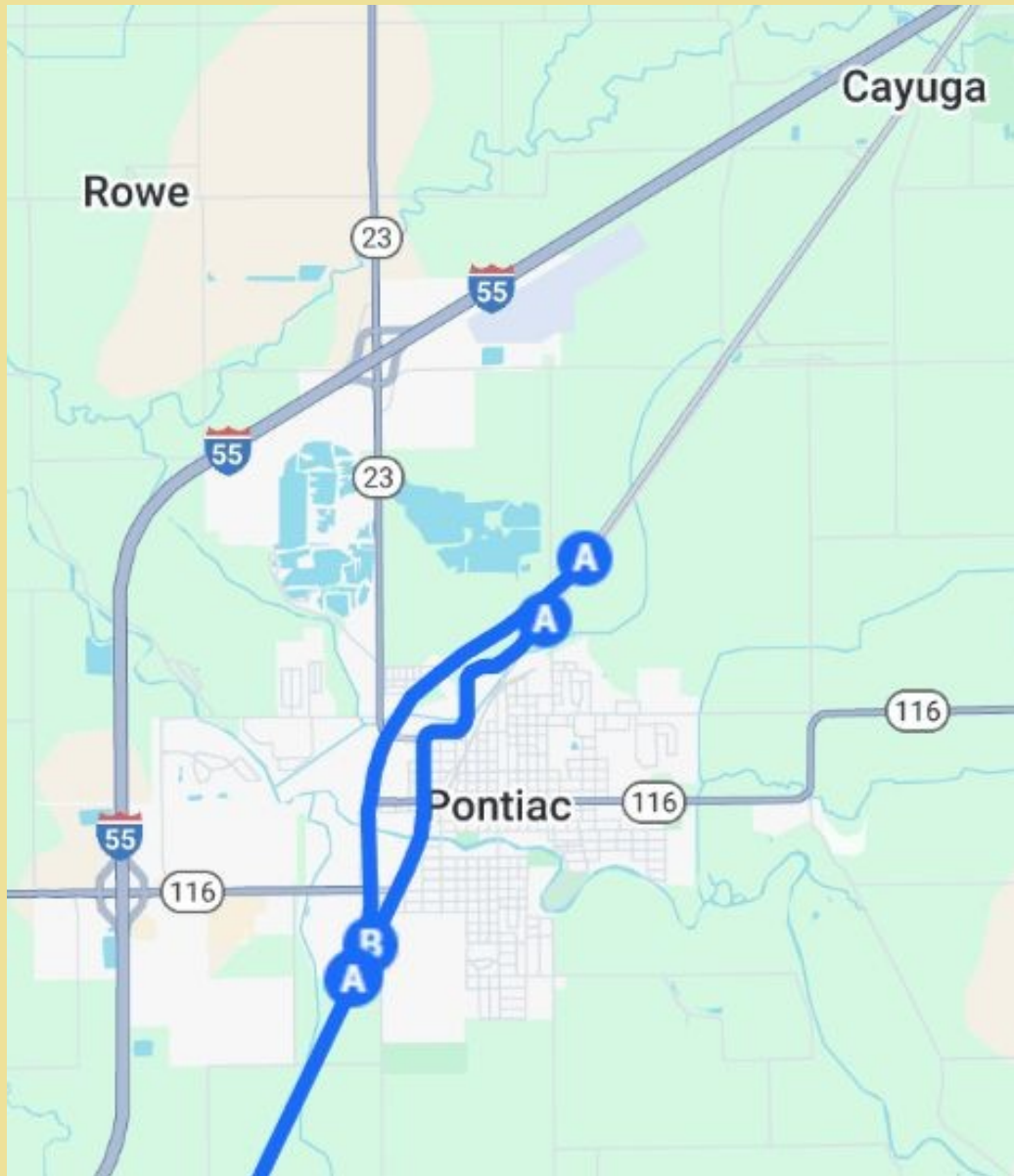
- Pontiac Trail, Route 4, Route 66 paths

- See the poster on the Easel



- Gradually shifted westward from downtown Pontiac

Route 66



- Original 1926 US Route 66 closer to downtown Pontiac
- 1945-1977 Bypass further west of downtown Pontiac

Route 66

1954–1955

A second set of lanes is added alongside earlier pavement north and south of Pontiac, completing the four-lane divided highway configuration for Route 66 in the immediate area; at this point the bypass/four-lane route is the principal through alignment for U.S. 66 around Pontiac

1958

Route 66

Interstate 55 opens on a new alignment that effectively bypasses the 1940s–1950s four-lane Route 66 corridor west of Pontiac, beginning the process by which the Interstate becomes the dominant through route while U.S. 66 remains signed on older pavement nearby.

1960s–early 1970s

Progressive upgrades and reroutings along the Chicago–Springfield corridor fold many four-lane Route 66 segments (including sections near Pontiac) into or adjacent to I-55, leaving portions of the old divided highway as frontage roads or local connectors while still nominally carrying the U.S. 66 designation.

Route 66

January 1, 1977

The State of Illinois terminates the U.S. 66 designation statewide after I-55 fully replaces it as the main through corridor, ending official Route 66 status on all surviving alignments in and around Pontiac (Chicago Street segments, bypass/four-lane sections, and associated connectors).



Late 1970s

Former Route 66 roadway segments in the Pontiac area transition entirely to state, county, and local designations, with some parts incorporated into I-55, others left as business routes or local streets that now form today's historic Route 66 driving loops.

Route 66



TheRoute-66.com

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the

Road Trip of your Life

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[International Visitors](#) +



- Excellent website with tons of Route 66 info for 3 major Livingston County Route 66 cities (Dwight, Odell, Pontiac)

"The First Traffic Light South of Chicago"

The crossroads of U.S. 66 and State Highway 47 was a dangerous one, and ordinary STOP signs didn't work well.

--Below is an excerpt from an article published in 1968 about this deadly crossroads:

Livingston [ranked] third with 20 [fatalities]. The worst trouble spot in Livingston County is the intersection of U.S. 66 and Illinois 47 at Dwight. Troopers patrolling this area are convinced that motorists southbound from Chicago become "hypnotized" in the long uninterrupted drive to Dwight where they encounter the first stop light or stop sign. Even though the intersection is well protected with warning signs and flashing lights, motorists apparently just don't "see" the traffic lights until it is too late. [The Pantagraph](#),

Route 66

Dwight



The Deadly Intersection

Route 66

Dwight



Ambler's Texaco Gas Station in Dwight, Illinois.

Route 66

Odell



Historic Standard Oil Gasoline Station in Odell, Illinois

Route 66

Odell

Odell Subway Tunnel

- Traffic through Odell along U.S. Highway 66 was quite heavy. This is hard to picture nowadays as you gaze down the quite residential district's street, but at one time hundreds of trucks and cars drove by constantly.
- The students and those going to Saint Paul's Church had to dodge the traffic to get across the road, which was dangerous.
- So the authorities built a pedestrian tunnel which the locals named the "*Subway*," so that the neighbors could cross the street safely.
- It was built in 1937 and remained in use until the Bypass Route 66 was built in 1944, this took the traffic away from the neighborhood. The tunnel was filled in in 1947, sealing it off.

Route 66

Odell



Young boys using the Subway Tunnel

Route 66

Odell



- Colorized by
AI program
Fotor.com

Young boys using the Subway Tunnel

Route 66

Odell



Historic marker and duplicated tunnel entrance

Route 66

Pontiac

Pontiac's Most Famous Route 66 Items

- About 25 historic murals.
- Route 66 Museum
- Log Cabin Restaurant
- Historic County Courthouse

Many other items to see.

Route 66

Pontiac



Map of Route 66

Route 66

Pontiac



Nice photo op for your Route 66 visit

Route 66

Pontiac



Route 66 Museum

Route 66

Pontiac



Old Log Cabin had to be rotated because Route 66 changed its route !!

Route 66

Why are so many Americans and foreigners still interested in Route 66 in 2026?



Route 66

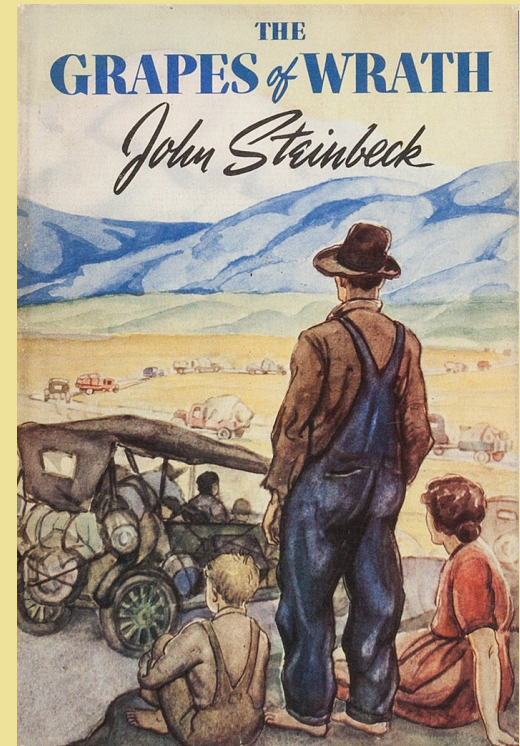
- Route 66 fascinates people because it combines transportation history, cultural symbolism, and a very tangible, still-drivable landscape that tells the story of 20th-century America.
- For many international visitors, it offers a concentrated, real-world version of the “America” they have seen in books, movies, and music.



Route 66

Historical role and migration

- It was one of the first highways to link Chicago with Los Angeles, making cross-country car travel realistic for ordinary families.
- During the Dust Bowl, Route 66 served as a primary path west for migrants fleeing failed farms, a story popularized in Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath."
- In World War II, the route carried troops and military supplies, then later supported the boom in post-war automobile tourism.



Route 66

Symbol of freedom and the “open road”

- Route 66 is widely described as symbolizing mobility, freedom, and the pursuit of the American Dream, especially the idea that anyone can “head west” to reinvent themselves.
- Because it predates the interstates and runs through towns instead of around them, it evokes a slower, more personal era of travel that many people find romantic or nostalgic.



Route 66

Cultural icon in media and music

- The road is embedded in popular culture via songs like “(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66,” TV series, travel writing, and countless films that use it as a backdrop or metaphor.

- This media presence means that people often know Route 66 as a legend first and a real highway second, which increases its mythic appeal worldwide.



Route 66 TV Series

Route 66



Colorized by AI
program
Fotor.com

Route 66

Roadside Americana and small-town life

- Route 66 passes directly through small towns, where classic motels, neon signs, diners, gas stations, and quirky roadside attractions created the “Main Street of America” feel.



- Visitors, especially from overseas, are drawn to the perceived authenticity of Midwestern and Southwestern communities, seeing the route as a portal to everyday American culture.

Route 66

Variety of landscapes and experiences

- In a single trip, travelers encounter Midwestern farmland, Great Plains, high desert, red rock country, and California coast, which makes the journey feel like a cross-section of the U.S. itself.
- The mix of preserved historic segments, ghost towns, revived main streets, and museums offers both historical interpretation and open-ended exploration along the same corridor.



Route 66

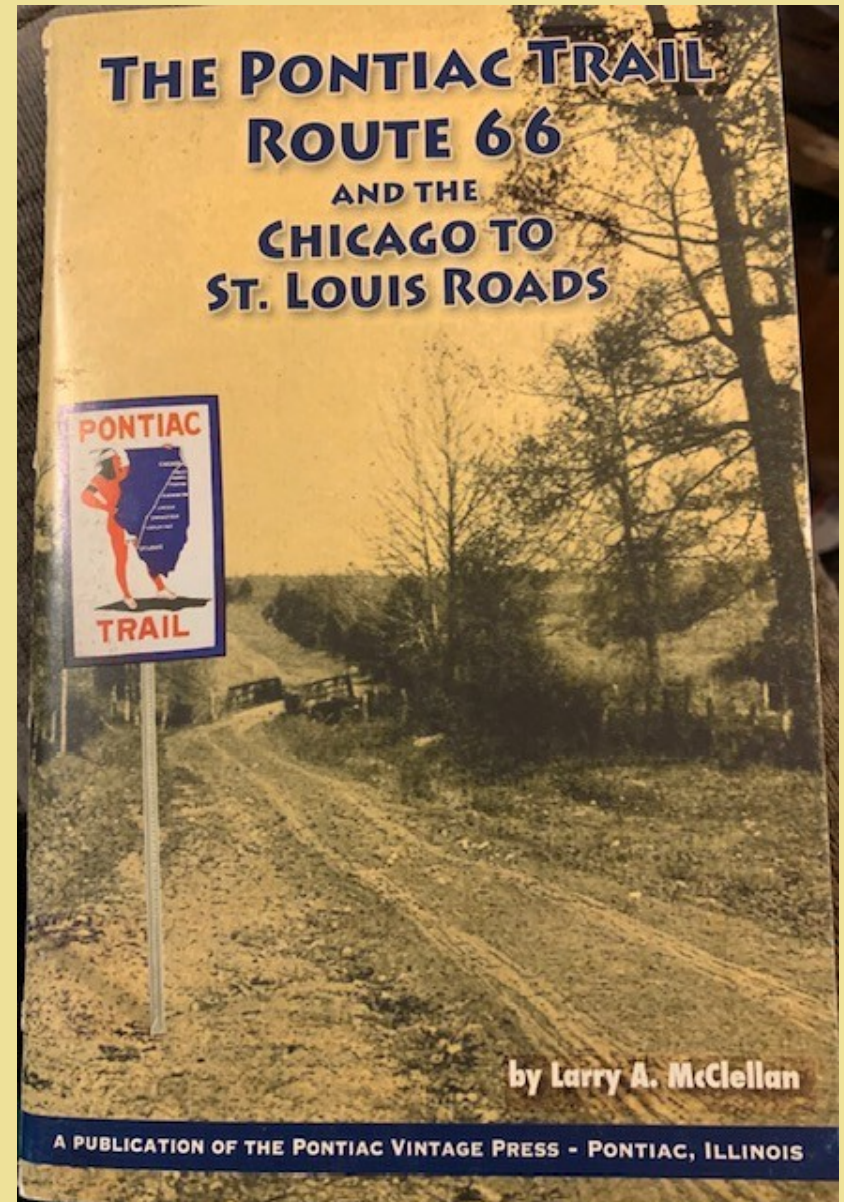
Preservation, nostalgia, and global curiosity

- Even after decommissioning, a large fraction of the alignment remains drivable as “Historic Route 66,” supported by museums, local groups, and national preservation efforts.
- Foreign travelers often view Route 66 as a concentrated “Americana experience,” while many Americans see it as a way to connect with family and national history, keeping demand strong from both groups.



Route 66

Additional Info Sources:



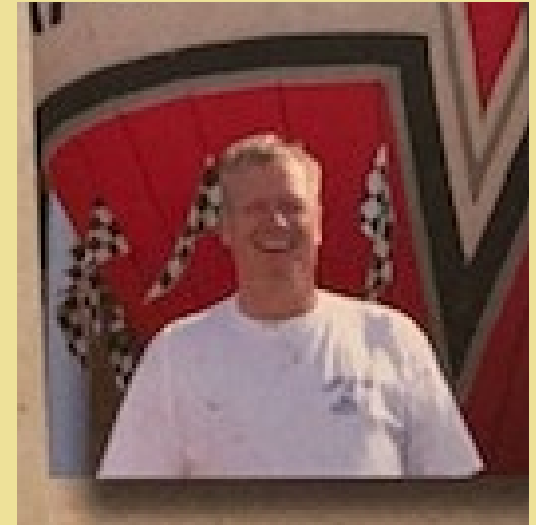
Route 66

Many thanks go to **Dave Sullivan**

-Pontiac Historian

-Board Member – Livingston County
Historical
Society

Dave Sullivan



Dave is a long time historian and resident of Pontiac, Illinois. He is also a devoted fan of Pontiac automobiles and can often be seen driving around Pontiac in his 1967 Firebird convertible. He spends a considerable amount of his spare time at libraries and other research facilities around the state of Illinois. He has done considerable research on Illinois Route 66, Livingston County and Chief Pontiac.

Route 66

Questions ??

Route 66

Back-Up slides

Route 66



January 22, 2026

Route 66

1926

U.S. Route 66 is commissioned, using existing Illinois State Highway 4 between Chicago and Springfield; in the Pontiac area this followed the earlier Pontiac Trail and hugged the railroad through town.

1926–1930

Through Pontiac, the first signed Route 66 enters on Ladd Street, runs south on Mill Street, then through the downtown core on Howard Street before continuing south along the older, winding State Route 4 roadway.

Route 66

1930–early 1940s: Chicago Street realignment

1930: Route 66 is realigned onto a straighter, more direct path along Chicago Street just west of downtown Pontiac to handle growing traffic volumes while still passing close to the business district.

Early 1930s: This Chicago Street routing becomes the primary in-town alignment, concentrating new gas stations, diners, and motor services along Chicago Street and effectively superseding the earlier Mill/Howard route for through traffic.

Route 66

Early 1940s (planned 1941–44)

A bypass alignment of U.S. 66 is laid out around Pontiac, designed to keep heavy wartime truck and military traffic out of downtown; this “beltline” runs along the western and northern margins of the city with a railroad underpass.

1943–1944

Construction proceeds on what becomes a divided, four-lane Route 66 corridor in the Pontiac–Chenoa–Cayuga stretch, with the bypass alignment around Pontiac forming part of this safer, higher-speed route.